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ABSTRACT

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations (UN), this paper examines the contributions of the UN to the area of South Asia. The paper focuses on regional conditions in South Asia that affect the achievement or denial of basic needs essential for peacebuilding. These needs include equal opportunity, education, employment, food, health care, political freedom, security, shelter, and social welfare. The paper summarizes the leaders' hopes for their societies and for the United Nations. The paper also reviews the role of UN sponsored educational programs in South Asia in the quest for social equity and justice. Sections of the paper include: (1) "Introduction"; (2) "Basic Indicators of Development for South Asia"; (3) "South Asian Leaders Look at the United Nations and the Future"; and (4) "United Nations School Reform Efforts in South Asia." (Contains 58 references.) (EH)

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South Asian Leaders Look Forward: The Link between Regional Development and United Nations Sponsored School Reform Programs

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Introduction

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations, leaders from around the world presented their views of the future in a landmark session in New York. The leaders' statements provide us with a guide to regional problems and a summary of their expectations and hopes for the next century. Their perspectives also provide an opportunity to analyze the state of development in each country and evaluate the present role of the United Nations in this effort. This paper will first focus on regional conditions in South Asia which affect the achievement or denial of basic needs that are essential for peacebuilding. These needs include equal opportunity, education, employment, food, health care, political freedom, security, shelter and social welfare. The paper will then summarize the leaders' hopes for their societies and for the United Nations. Finally, the paper will review the role of United Nations sponsored education programs in South Asia in the quest for social equity and justice.

I. Basic Indicators of Development for South Asia

South Asia comprises seven countries ranging from the tiny island state of the Maldives with 200,000 people to the huge state of India with a population over 800 million. Twenty percent of the world's people live in this region. Population density varies greatly from Bangladesh where an average of 2028 people occupy each square mile to the mountain state of Bhutan where just 84 people are found in the same space. In the last decade population in the region has increased by 226 million or 25 percent of the 1980 total. The population and economy are predominantly rural and agricultural in all countries: in India 76 percent live outside cities in small villages; in Pakistan 70 percent are villagers, in Sri Lanka 78 percent, in Nepal 82 percent. Life expectancy for males born in 1990 ranged from 48 in Bhutan to 71.5 in Sri Lanka; for females it was 47 and 78.5 respectively. Male life expectancy exceeds that for females in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Pakistan. All countries in the region experienced modest to significant increases in life expectancy over the decade 1980-1990; the greatest gain was in India where male life expectancy went from 42 in 1980 to 57 in 1990; female life expectancy rose from 41 to 58 in the same period. Improvements in agriculture and health care account for most of these gains.

South Asia is a region of great cultural and linguistic diversity. Two of the world's largest religions, Buddhism and Hinduism, originated here. A third major religion, Islam, is widespread in the region. In addition there are a number of minority sects. Each country has a predominant religious majority along with minority groups. Pakistan is the most homogeneous being 97 percent Moslem, whereas Sri Lanka is the most heterogeneous with 69 percent Buddhist, 15 percent Hindu, 8 percent Christian and 7 percent Moslem. Religious intolerance and inter-ethnic conflict are historic and recurrent sources of violence and instability in the region.

Significant problems in health and environmental preservation exist in South Asia. The high rate of population growth puts heavy strain on systems of public health and sanitation. Endemic diseases such as cholera, malaria, plague and typhoid are still troublesome. Industrial development, transportation emissions and the pressure of population have degraded and depleted the environment in many parts of the region. Urban areas have high levels of air and water pollution. Nonetheless, infant mortality has declined in all countries over the decade 1980 to 1990. The most dramatic gain was in Nepal which went from losing 169 children per 1000 births

to 106. Today infant mortality ranges from a high of 125 in Pakistan to a low of 29 in Sri Lanka. However, the rate in Pakistan is 12 times and Sri Lanka 3 times the average rate for Europe and North America.

Gains have also been made in literacy and education but there are major challenges yet to overcome. Sri Lanka ranks highest with 87 percent literacy whereas only 12 percent are literate in Bhutan. Illiteracy is still a majority condition in the large population states. In Bangladesh 67 percent are illiterate, in India 63 percent and in Pakistan 74 percent. There are 682 million illiterate people in these three countries. Gender disparity is also a marked feature of illiteracy: in Bangladesh female illiteracy is 78 percent, male 51 percent; in India females are 71 percent illiterate, males 58 percent; in Pakistan females are 81 percent illiterate, males 55 percent. Formal school attendance also varies considerably; in Sri Lanka 84 percent attend primary school whereas only 21 percent go to school in Bhutan. In the decade 1980-1990 dramatic gains in primary school enrollment were made in Nepal and Sri Lanka. On the other hand, population increase continues to hinder efforts to expand formal education toward the goal of universal primary education (UPE). In Bangladesh, for example, which has the region's highest annual rate of population growth (2.6 percent), primary enrollments fell from 34 to 24 percent in the decade 1980 to 1990.

The region is experiencing several economic transitions. India, for example, is shifting gradually from a centralized state regulated economy to free market economics with more enterprise and foreign investment. Nevertheless, all countries in South Asia are low income economies. Per capita GNP ranges from a high of $420 per year in Sri Lanka to the low of $170 in Bangladesh. Relatively speaking, the region has 3 poor low growth economies--Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal--and 3 rich high growth economies--India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. India's annual rate of economic growth in 1990 was slightly better than the United States and the Sri Lanka economy grew at nearly twice the United States rate. In these three growth states the middle class is expanding and there have been dramatic increases in industrial, manufacturing and service sectors of production. Thus far this growth has been achieved without significant increases in inflation which so often destabilizes the growth process in Third World countries.

Political instability and conflict has led to violence, oppression and disorder in the region. Governments in the region are all democratic. Bicameral legislatures are the rule, however, significant differences exist in distribution of powers. For example, Bhutan has a powerful hereditary monarchy; Nepal is a constitutional monarchy with Asia's first elected Communist government; India and Pakistan use a federal government model. Strong presidential powers exist in many states along with the Westminster system. There has been a trend toward family political dynasties in some countries such as India and Pakistan. Women have achieved top national leadership positions in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Yet, paradoxically, the region has widespread gender disparity in education, legal rights and occupational opportunity. Democracy has a long tradition in India; on the other hand, it is very recent in Nepal which held its first elections in 1991. SAARC, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, was formed by the 7 countries to provide a constructive forum to discuss and resolve common social and economic issues.

There are significant political conflicts within and between states that periodically endanger peace. Religious and ethnic divisions along with poverty and discontent have caused desecrations, pogroms and violent internal opposition to some governments. Religious fundamentalism and

nationalist xenophobia are dangerous trends today in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. Disputes over territory and self-determination have also caused civil strife as well as interstate wars. For example, the long-standing antagonism between India and Pakistan has led to a nuclear arms race which could explode over the Kashmir issue. Minority groups are underserved and marginalized in somestates; this has led to a bloody civil war in Sri Lanka, a Sikh separatist rebellion in the Punjab State in India; guerilla war by Islamic forces in Kashmir who desire self-governance, and insurgency in Assam where some groups resent neglect by the Indian central government.

In many respects the socio-political climate in South Asia is one of transformation which is driving a gradual revolution of rising expectations and opportunities. Many factors are contributing to this change. Caste restrictions have loosened with policies that facilitate social mobility, however, in villages and cities kinship and caste still maintain the hereditary character of many occupations. Tribal minorities are also caught up in a process of integration into modern secular life. Discontent and new class conflicts have been created by rural development programs which enriched large landowners and neglected the landless rural poor. New programs are needed to increase equality and uplift the condition of the very poor. The widening class gap is even more evident in cities which contain wealthy suburbs and slums where congestion, pollution, lack of sanitation and unemployment create a world where crime, destitution, disease and ignorance are the entrenched reality of life. The feminist movement aims to reverse patterns of gender discrimination and achieve greater equity for women, however, women are not united on these issues and some remain satisfied with traditional values that accord women status and influence within the framework of the household. The context in which the United Nations functions in South Asia is one in which tradition and modernization coexist but one in which the balance between these social forces is in transition.

II. South Asian Leaders Look at the United Nations and the Future

The United Nations has committed its resources for the last 50 years to the war against disease, hunger, ignorance, poverty and strife which so often conspire to deny the basic needs that are essential for human peace and security. The leaders of South Asian states recently reflected on the work of the United Nations and development problems in their region on the occasion of the United Nations' 50th anniversary. All leaders recognized the United Nations as an essential beacon of hope in a strife-worn world. They praised United Nations efforts in behalf of international peace and security through preventive diplomacy and peacekeeping. The importance of the United Nations' role in promoting friendship, unity and well-being of all the world's peoples and in rendering economic relief to poor nations was also acknowledged. On the other hand, 5 of the 7 regional leaders called for revitalization and restructuring of the United Nations with more non-Western representation on the Security Council, greater democratization within the organization, creation of a stand-by United Nations force and an independent United Nations financial base.

The regional leaders presented a long list of critical issues which face the world as the 21st century approaches. Most of these involved concerns with political security arising from ongoing crises in the region. These include: international conflicts such as those between China and India and India and Pakistan; conflicts within countries which have roots in ethno-religious differences aggravated by poverty; and social conflicts caused by inequality and economic frustration.

Concern was expressed about the growth of religious fundamentalism manifested in chauvinism, exclusivism and intolerance. Note was also taken of the spread of global disorder which has followed the end of the Cold War. Some leaders stressed the ongoing need for collective regional security and disarmament. Particular problems cited as troublesome were arms smuggling, drug trafficking, and the plight of Afghan and Tibetan refugees. The interrelated issues of economic development, population growth and poverty were also noted. Protection of cultural heritage was another priority. Three environmental problems mentioned were unsustainable management of world resources, rising sea levels which pose a threat to small island nations worldwide, and the general widespread destruction of the environment.

Turning to future needs, the leaders focused on many aspects of political, social and economic development. Economic and social stability were identified as the foundation for peace. Peacekeeping, peace building and the maintenance of democratic institutions, justice and political freedom were seen as essential. The right to self-determination was emphasized by Pakistan with reference to the Islamic autonomy movement in Kashmir. However, it seems clear that assertion of this right could pose a threat to unity for some multi-ethnic states in the region. The need to guarantee the independence and security of small states from foreign invasion was stressed by the Maldives which faced a mercenary attack in 1988. Regional collective security pacts such as SAARC, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, were mentioned by Sri Lanka as a useful means to maintain peace and stability.

In the area of social and economic development the leaders focused on the need for economic growth, with equitable distribution, preservation of human rights and provision of basic needs to alleviate the impact of disease, hunger, ignorance and poverty. One means to this end was the idea of a new world order in which rich nations share their economic prosperity with poorer nations. Another means was through more effective grassroots organization to deal with problems of environmental destruction, gender inequity, human rights violations, population explosion and social disintegration. One predominantly Islamic country, Pakistan, addressed the need for restoration of moral values; concern was voiced about freedom of expression in the new information highway which could pervert, pollute or destroy cultural and moral values.

Several leaders commented with pride about their countries' contributions to world civilization. Elements cited included: the sources of spiritual truth in their religious heritage; traditional medical knowledge; and the ideals of peace, non-violence, tolerance, equality and understanding. Prime Minister Mrs. Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan closed in a global vein by citing the western philosopher Spinoza's view that "Peace is not merely the absence of war. It is a virtue that springs from the force of character."

III. United Nations School Reform Efforts in South Asia

The United Nations is promoting several educational programs in South Asia which aim to foster economic and social development. Many United Nations efforts are now focused in APPEAL, the Asia Pacific Program of Education for All Learners. This project aims to build greater social equity and educational opportunity for the least advantaged groups. These include: groups living in remote areas who lack adequate school facilities; illiterate adults; impoverished and landless rural peasants; members of scheduled castes and tribes; refugees; school dropouts; street children; untrained or undertrained teachers; women; and young girls. The objectives of these

United Nations programs include: expansion of literacy; family planning to limit population growth; human rights education; improvement of the condition and status of women; promotion of healthy early child development; rural and urban community development; universal primary education; and upgrading standards for teacher education. Because population growth and diverse needs have overwhelmed the capacity of the existing formal education systems, United Nations initiatives have stressed alternatives such as distance education and non-formal education along with boosting the drive for universal primary education.

The condition of girls and women has become a United Nations and government concern because improvement of female education is seen as one key to solving population and development problems. There are 360 million illiterate women in the Asia-Pacific region. Most are victims of cultural, economic and political marginalization. Empowering women with knowledge and skills is associated with added family income, greater enrollment of children in school, higher living standards, improved awareness of health and child care, an increased pool of skilled human resources, later marriage and smaller families. All of these gains are likely to speed up desired progress toward universal primary education and economic growth.

Serious efforts to expand the education of women are being made in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan. Saptagram, a grassroots organization in Bangladesh, has empowered rural landless women through economic self-reliance, group dynamics, literacy training and preventive health care. In India, girls and women in Uttar Pradesh gained cooperative experience, literacy and civil and social awareness through informal education. Other efforts have sought to boost technology education to help women qualify for high skill jobs in emergent high tech industries. The United Nations has also sponsored local development of literacy materials for women. In Pakistan a significant gender gap exists due to several factors: cultural constraints which keep girls at home; lack of female teachers and gender-segregated schools; poverty; and school distance, inflexible schedules and irrelevant curricula. National efforts to improve learning for women include: community participation; distance education; a home-school project; involvement of Mosque schools; linking education with income generation; and training female teachers. In Nepal non-formal education efforts have tried to empower adult women and out-of-school girls through literacy and training in collective action; the focus was on building awareness of the needs of children, cooperative child care and economic development.

Literacy education for adults and out-of-school children is another prime effort of the United Nations APPEAL project. In Bangladesh, where 5 million children age 6 to 10 are out of school and 74 percent of the population is illiterate, non-formal primary education is conducted for rural children through literacy centers created by small local organizations in rural areas. India is experimenting with interactive computer technology which may assist equity and access to education in remote areas. PROPEL, a non-formal education project for rural development, is training people in 137 villages to take responsibility for basic education. This project, influenced by Paolo Freire's philosophy of conscientization or awareness-building, strives for holistic development of rural society through adult literacy, early child care, post-literacy learning, teacher training and women's groups. Hallmarks of the PROPEL project, which also involves outreach to urban street children, are local community commitment to education and adaptation to the needs of local culture. The model is decentralization which contrasts with the central planning characteristic of formal education.

The issue of relevance of education to local needs has also received much attention. In Pakistan, rural adult literacy materials teach agriculture and livestock management to farmers. Another focus in APPEAL literacy materials is population units which develop the concept of delayed marriage and stress the relative advantages of small versus large families. A non-formal approach is used to bring basic education to out-of-school children. This involves: classes to accommodate workers; confidence-building; diverse learning sites; integration with the learner's life style; less rigid time demands; and self-learning materials. A UNESCO effort, the Asia Pacific Program for Educational Innovation and Development (APEID), has tried to reformulate science and technology education with emphasis on application to real life needs.

Another United Nations' initiative involves understanding and acting on issues relating to the relationship between child development and learning. Educating women to understand the importance of child health and nutrition is one aspect of this effort. The United Nations Development Program has promoted efforts to study and develop remedial programs which stress the linkage of pre-school child care, learning and later economic development. The rationale asserts that the child's basic health and welfare are essential to the later achievement of a well and productive adult life. The United Nations Children's Fund has focused on programs that deal with environmental problems affecting children such as child labor, disease, malnutrition, pollution, substance abuse and unsafe housing.

Another major educational deficiency in South Asia is teacher shortage and the prevalence of untrained teachers. This problem, like population explosion and lack of school facilities, is a major obstacle in the way of efforts to achieve Universal Primary Education (UPE). In all South Asian countries distance education for pre- and inservice teachers is practiced with radio, TV, self-instructional modules and face-to-face tutorials. One focus of United Nations sponsored programs is upgrading the skills of teachers who will teach children in remote areas, disadvantaged groups and girls. A related concern is the training of teachers to function in a non-formal school culture where the authoritarian teacher-centered approach must yield to a democratic learner-centered style with dialogue, open participation and shared responsibility.

The United Nations effort in teacher education is sponsored by the Asian Center of Educational Innovation for Development (ACEID). In Bangladesh, for example, an inservice distance education project is trying to improve the skills of 100,000 untrained secondary school teachers who account for 70 percent of all teachers at this level. Salary incentives are used as a motivator; by 1990 6,918 teachers had completed the program. In Nepal, UNESCO and UNICEF have assisted the Radio Education Teacher Training Project (RETT), which began in 1984, to prepare 80,000 teachers to work toward the goal of UPE by the year 2000. Another focus of teacher education programs is to increase the number of female teachers in conjunction with the goal of educational equity for all girls; this need is critical in countries like Nepal, for example, where only 13 percent of teachers are women.

As in Pakistan, distance learning in Nepal has also been used to reach over 100,000 secondary students by broadcasting to schools in remote areas. India began using distance education to enable the masses to access learning in 1962; today over 500,000 are enrolled in these programs; the focus is lifelong education for housewives, professionals, workers and youth.

In addition to these major initiatives, United Nations agencies also promote a number of other efforts to reform curriculum and change school structures. Infusion of human rights education in K-12 curriculum and adult education is an important means of peacebuilding in

societies like India and Sri Lanka where internal ethno-religious diversity has led to intolerance and violent conflict. Another focus of the Education for All program in India are projects to prepare teachers to assist special needs children in the classroom and to support initiatives that aim to rehabilitate disabled people.

It is difficult to cover all the United Nations efforts here, however, a few brief concluding observations are possible. It is evident that the goals of equity and equal opportunity undertaken by the United Nations' school reform initiatives involve culture change. Traditional societies in South Asia are undergoing a gradual process of cultural transformation. However, the rural-agrarian economic base, traditional social stratification, gender discrimination and conservative patriarchal religious values represent a cultural core which may continue to resist change for years to come. On the other hand, secularization and modernization are well-established trends which favor the direction taken by United Nations programs. Even more troublesome is the impact of the population explosion on land, environment and resources. Government and private schools cannot hope to attain the goals of universal literacy and basic education, which are the foundation for improved living standards, if population growth continues to overwhelm the institutional capacities of the economic base. There are, however, many positive signs in the reform efforts now underway. The movement to strengthen rural community development, motivate disadvantaged groups and build a spirit of self-reliance seems assured of some success because it has roots in recent South Asian history and it is attuned to the revolution of rising expectations. Gandhi's message that human dignity can be gained through non-violent struggle against dependency, ignorance and oppression is still alive and relevant today.

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